Dyslexia – a Teacher's Perspective

My name is Harriet Clark. I live in Prospect, CT. I fully support House Bill 7254, an Act Requiring Special Education Teachers to complete a Program of Study in Evidence-based Structured Literacy Interventions for Students with Dyslexia. The is the third of three pieces of legislation, two of which passed in 2014-2016: PA 14-39 and PA 15-97 to teach general education staff to recognize symptoms of dyslexia; PA 16-92, to train remedial reading staff in appropriate interventions. Now it is time to empower all special education teachers with effective reading strategies for to teach students with dyslexia by enacting HB 7254.

After one year teaching a self-contained class of 9 to 12 year olds, I was painfully aware that I did not know how to teach reading. I used the basal readers and teachers' manuals prescribed in the IEPs (5 different levels), but most of my students simply could not read the words. However, they understood orally read stories and content material. I was baffled.

That summer I took a two-week intensive course in the Orton-Gillingham approach to teaching dyslexics how to decode and encode (read and spell). I learned the neurology of dyslexia, the history and structure of the English language, and the confluence of phonology and phonics and orthography. I was armed with the knowledge and words to talk to my students about their language learning disability, how to categorize and sort the jumble of sounds in their heads. I had strategies and techniques for them to practice their emerging skills.

Direct instruction of a multisensory, sequential, cumulative code-based reading approach requires intensive remediation by a highly trained and experienced teacher. That means one hour a day, 5 days a week. Does the approach produce results? Yes, Haskins Reading Laboratories in New Haven have images showing the effect of quality direct instruction on a child's brain after one year. New neural pathways were being created. Intensive direct instruction in reading by qualified teachers actually makes changes in the brains of children with dyslexia.

These children suffer shame and discouragement because of their disability. They believe the messages sent, both explicitly and implicitly. "You're not trying. You could do this yesterday. What's the matter with you? You need to put in more effort. Pay attention!" These students have to put on courage every school morning to face the challenge of reading throughout their school day. They know they are not learning like their peers. They try harder – until they become so discouraged that frequently problem behaviors borne from frustration and anger rise to the surface.

I cringe when a district says at a PPT that they are doing all they can to help the identified student, or they are using the "ABC program" (but have not provided the teacher with the hours of training and supervision needed to be effective). I know the child will not make the gains implied and it will be because the child "hasn't tried hard enough."

Give special education teachers the tools they need to help them succeed in their mission to teach students with dyslexia to succeed. Thank you for your time and consideration of this important issue.

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